

# Encounters of the Real Kind

## Musings, poetry, stories about elders, forgetfulness and life

Encounters of a Real Kind are exactly that: deep, life-changing meetings between human beings.

A program of the Elder Ashram Gero-Wellness training for psychology and social work interns places graduate and post-graduate students in an eldercare community. There these interns work from an existential-humanistic, processwork perspective with elders of all ages. Encounters of a Real Kind is a collection of musings, poetry and stories from these interns that speak to their encounters with these elders over the course of their one year training.

Many of the resident elders present with symptoms of forgetfulness, often referred to as dementia, as well as with so-called behavioral health issues and various forms of physical frailty. But rather than focus on symptoms, the Elder Ashram Gero-Wellness training emphasizes that we need to 'see' and care for the whole human being. It teaches that symptoms are meaningful and important signals for a deeper understanding of each person, that these symptoms need to be met with curiosity and respect, with an attitude of wonder and love.

There is never anything 'wrong' with a person. Rather, we ask: what is right about what is happening now? Where does it want to lead us? How are we to understand its message to us? We see our elders with eyes of love, not with eyes that look for pathologies and disease. Elders, with all of their richness, depth and life-experience, are the most beautiful teachers in this world. These teachers provide our interns – but really all of us who take time to be with them – the privilege to deeply experience and understand what it means to live a life, to have lived a life. Elders give those who will allow themselves to be present with them an exceptional opportunity to grow into a full human being.

This is not an easy journey. Interns face the complexity of the question of human identity and the fear and anxiety of disability and dying. They begin to understand the difference between being-with and doing-to and learn the art of unfolding a person's process. They experience the many forms of forgetfulness and states of awareness, the many ways of communication, verbal and non-verbal. They begin to appreciate the quality and subjective nature of time, of slowing down, of being present and of listening deeply. They learn to establish a trusting relationship and experience the richness and challenge of hospice work. They learn about mindfulness, about focused attention, building community, and the meaning of isolation and loneliness. They learn to be with coma, trauma, and the many other forms and meanings of dependencies. They learn about the finitude of life, about what really matters – to them and others.

Interns begin to grasp the difference between information and knowledge, between knowledge and wisdom. Hearing an elder speak about life, sitting quietly next to a forgetful elder holding hands, walking slowly with an elder noticing one's breath, the breeze on one's face - these are encounters of the real kind. They present us with an inkling of the dimension of the human soul and spirit.

These encounters change your life.